

The Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Jonesboro, Illinois

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The Jonesboro debate centered on Stephen A. Douglas' Freeport Doctrine in which he held that local authorities should choose whether or not to enforce federal laws.

Jonesboro was the third in a series of seven formal debates between Stephen A. Douglas and Abraham Lincoln in 1858. Both men sought a seat in the U.S. Senate, and they argued primarily about the moral and political aspects of slavery. At Jonesboro, Lincoln accused Douglas of being unfaithful to the intentions of the framers of the Constitution. Douglas countered by saying that "Thomas Jefferson meant only English people when he said, 'All men are created equal and all men should be free.'" Lincoln responded that Jefferson meant all people are created equal whether they are black or white.

The Lincoln-Douglas Debates were the first time such a forum was used to determine political office. One candidate spoke for an hour; the other spoke for an hour and a half; the candidate speaking then concluded with a half hour rejoinder. This format, revolutionary in 1858, continues to be the standard for high school debates as well as some contemporary presidential debates. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates were particularly important because they focused public attention on important economic, political, and social issues.

During the Freeport debate, Lincoln tried to force Douglas to indicate whether or not slavery was constitutional. Douglas believed in popular sovereignty, the notion that each territory should decide for itself whether slavery would exist within its boundaries since the Constitution did not strictly prohibit it. On the other hand, Abraham Lincoln

thought that the U. S. Supreme Court should decide whether slavery would exist in a territory.

The U. S. Supreme Court had previously addressed slavery in the Dred Scott case of 1856. Dred Scott, a black man who was the slave of a military officer from Missouri, had moved with his owner first to Illinois and then to Wisconsin, both free states, before finally settling in Missouri, a slave state. When his master died, Scott thought he should be free. In 1846, a group of abolitionists helped him bring his case to the U. S. Supreme Court, where seven out of nine judges ruled that no slave or descendent of a slave could become a U.S. citizen; a slave was the property of his owner. This ruling was particularly controversial because black men had been able to vote in five states in 1776: Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Connecticut.

Douglas championed “popular sovereignty.” He argued that a state was created by the will of its people, and consequently, people are the source of a state’s political power. Douglas’ position may have been an excuse to delay a ruling on whether or not slavery was acceptable. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that “Douglas feels from experience he has had, that he cannot maintain popular sovereignty and Dred Scottism in the speech.” Douglas also argued that blacks were not U.S. citizens. He said, "A negro is naught and ought naught to be an American citizen." Most people in Southern Illinois agreed with this statement, including Lincoln.

Slavery raised important economic, moral, and social issues. In the Jonesboro debate, Douglas claimed that Lincoln was “inviting warfare between the North and the South, to be carried on with ruthless vengeance.” Southern plantations required intensive labor. Slaves not only provided this labor, they vastly increased the owners’ profit since

slaves were not paid. Southerners believed that an end to slavery would destroy the plantation system and drastically alter their way of life as a result. On the other hand, many people in the North, such as Quakers, felt that slavery was morally wrong and that all people were equal. Abolition was prevalent in the North but banned in the South, where teachers suspected of supporting it were fired and abolitionist literature was burned.

Lincoln and Douglas were both campaigning for a seat in the U. S. Senate. Douglas originally tried to avoid debating Lincoln, but pressure from the public forced him to reconsider. Since Douglas ultimately wanted to be president, he realized that any attention gained would be beneficial.

Most believe that Lincoln won the debates even though he lost the senatorial election. Lincoln wanted to keep slavery within those states that already had it and to prevent its expansion to new states joining the Union. Lincoln was better received in most places, even southern Illinois, because Douglas had originally tried to dodge the debates. "It is useless for Judge Douglas to attempt to conceal the real reason for his refusal to meet Mr. Lincoln. There is no disguising the fact that the "little dodger" is afraid of the "Long Abe" on the stump. He dare not go over the State with him and subject his sophisticates and humbugs to the others raking broadsides."

In the long run, the debates were beneficial to Lincoln because they gave him national exposure. They also focused the nation's attention on slavery and established debate as a valuable part of the democratic election process. [From Ray B. Basler, "Third Debate with Stephen A. Douglas at Jonesboro, Illinois September 15, 1858." *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. 2006. The National Park Service.

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